



# Anna Levesque

**Former member of the Canadian Freestyle Team, Anna Levesque has become a reknowned leader in kayak instruction through her teaching programs dedicated exclusively to women. Anna's clinics are well known for focusing on improving kayaking skills as well as using paddling as a powerful tool for personal development.**

Words and Photography: Paul Villecourt



Anna and Mel walking enjoying the sites as they walk to the put-in of the Antigua in Apazapan.

*Let's speak frankly. Paddling has been and remains a male-dominated sport – at least in numbers. Until recent years, whitewater gear, instruction, and attitudes did little to draw women to the sport and keep them there. Anna began thinking about this while training for freestyle with other women paddlers in 2002. Several years later, she decided to launch teaching programs and DVDs exclusively dedicated to women. And it's worked! Ladies are coming from the world's four corners to attend the clinics organized around the US and Canada, and also in Mexico. Mixing whitewater kayaking, yoga, and spirituality Anna Levesque helps ladies to find self-confidence on the river and in their life.*

**KS: For those who don't know, can you tell us about what you do through Girls at Play?**

**AL:** I work to provide opportunities and guidance for women to discover, empower and connect with their passions and their true nature via kayaking, yoga and travel. I do this foremost by following my own passions and spiritual practice and then creating trips, instructional DVDs and retreats that allow me to share that with others.

**KS: What does running Girls at Play entail?**

**AL:** My job requires that I do a lot of different things. Teaching and guiding kayaking is the easy part! When I'm producing a DVD for instance, I have to write the script, make up the budget, find sponsorship, hire the videographer/editor, recruit female paddlers to participate, direct the shooting, assist with the editing, market and promote the DVD, oversee the art for the cover and inserts, find the music for the background, hire a photographer for photos or find photos, and work with the distributor to get it out. Since I'm a one-woman show, I also do my own reconciling of accounts, answering emails, marketing, updating my website, product development, filling orders, strategic planning, writing of articles for magazines, blogs and newsletters, scheduling, logistics for classes, retreats and trips, and the list goes on. After answering this question I think I need an assistant! Anyone interested?

**KS: Why and when did you decide to work with ladies?**

**AL:** I didn't one day decide that I wanted to work with women; my desire to work with women evolved naturally from my own search for resources and support within the industry. I remember being up on the Ottawa training freestyle back in 2001 or 2002 and doing video review with some female peers. It seemed to me that we were all struggling with the same technical aspects of freestyle. I thought that maybe because we're shaped differently than men that we also learn differently or may need to develop different aspects of technique and strength. I also felt that the needs of women were being ignored by most leaders in the industry at the time. For instance, I remember looking at an instructional book that had only 3 photos of a female paddler in it, and it was a pretty thick book. Gear for women was just starting to surface. The last thing I would say is that I also noticed that my female peers would tell stories of getting emotional on the river or being scared and trying to hide it from their male peers in fear that they would think less of them for being emotional. Many of them felt that their confidence had taken a beating in these situations. I heard several stories like this and experienced them myself. What I realized is that most women needed more support from their male peers and each other. When women are allowed to express and be themselves on the river, their skills and confidence soar. At the time I felt that I could fill these needs by making an instructional DVD for women that dealt with some of the technical aspects of how women learn and paddle differently as well as address the emotional needs of women. So, I produced Girls at Play and started

teaching women's clinics. Both the DVD and the clinics were overwhelmingly popular with women. I felt inspired by the women I was meeting and by the fact that my work was helping them improve, feel good and pursue something they loved to do. So it was easy to continue down this path.

**KS: Did you have a specific plan for how your life and your business have developed or has it all just happened?**

**AL:** I definitely have not had a specific plan for my life, and it's not that stuff has just happened either. I've followed my passions and what I enjoy doing and as time goes on I get better at listening to and following my own intuition and inner guidance. A lot of people told me that it wasn't worth creating an instructional DVD or an instruction program in whitewater specifically for women. Luckily I chose to listen to my own inner guidance instead of listening to everyone else's opinions.

**KS: Ladies are pretty rare on European rivers. What is like in North America?**

**AL:** Here in North America women aren't rare on the rivers. I feel like there are a lot of female paddlers on the rivers here and the numbers seem to be growing. I don't have numerical proof of that, but I see more women paddling all the time. There are more kayak schools offering women's classes and there's a festival in the Southeast US called Boaterchick Festival that attracts hundreds of female boaters to one area to paddle together.

**KS: Is kayaking a macho sport?**

**AL:** I looked up the word macho so I could properly answer this question and the definition I found was: «Showing aggressive pride in one's masculinity.» In my opinion, kayaking has traditionally been a sport practiced mostly by men. And the owners of the companies, the designers, the editors of magazines and so on in the industry have also traditionally been men. So I do feel that there has been an element of machoism present in kayaking over the years because, in my experience, when you get a bunch of men together doing adrenaline pumping stuff there tends to be some machoism. Now that there are more women paddling, more female role models and more women in higher positions in companies within the industry, I think there is less machoism in the sport and a more balanced approach is evolving.

**KS: If machoism is something quite «natural» in a men's world, have you noticed some specific behaviors in the ladies' paddling world?**

**AL:** In my experience, women in general tend to doubt themselves, worry about being the «weakest link» in the group and are more likely to psych themselves out about possible consequences, real or imagined. Women are also very positive and get great satisfaction out of supporting one another and celebrating every accomplishment. I think that the social aspect of kayaking is just as important for most women as

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the challenges that the sport provides. So, when women paddle together they are generally very supportive of one another, which puts them at ease which, in turn, builds their confidence and helps them to work through their fears. If women feel like they're being judged, hurried or pushed too hard on the river they tend to get very nervous and lose confidence in their abilities.

**KS: Do you think some women also lack humor sometimes when they get shit from the boys, or do you think men do not realize that they are pushing too far with their thick jokes?**

**AL:** I think it depends on the intention behind the shit giving. Personally, I enjoy giving and getting shit if the intention is fun, playful and non-harming. And I think it's awesome how men can harass each other in the eddy in a good way that inspires them to paddle better. I've also seen men give women grief with the intention of beating down their confidence and making fun of them because they don't agree with how they're acting or doing things. In these cases the men are just being mean and there's no playfulness about it. When women know that they are supported and accepted by the men they're paddling with, then getting shit isn't a big deal. I think that women can work on not taking things too personally and men can work on being more supportive.

**KS: On a similar note, how do your female peers in the industry see you? It seems that some are not necessarily into your approach and reproach you with being too feminine. What do you have to say to that? What are your relationships like with other "famous female paddlers"?**

Dropping the first slide on the road-side section of the Alsesec.

**AL:** I have a good relationship with other "famous female paddlers" and I appreciate opportunities to work with them. Tanya Faux and I had an opportunity to teach together on a Women's Paddling Retreat last summer and we worked really well together. In fact, we both agreed that the combination of both of our teaching approaches made for an awesome curriculum. But if some do not like or understand what I try to do, then everyone is entitled to their opinion.

**KS: Spirituality and philosophy are very present in your approach. It's a unique way of working. Why did you decide to work this way?**

**AL:** I've always been drawn to spiritual practice. I started meditating when I was in high school, but didn't have a teacher at the time so I stopped for a number of years. I came back to it about thirteen years ago when I discovered yoga. Along with my yoga and meditation practice, I also belong to a community of women in Asheville who support each other's personal development. My spiritual practice is a very important part of my life because it helps me to do my best to know, live and speak my truth in a compassionate, loving way. My practice continually allows me to let go of old beliefs, behaviors and patterns that no longer serve me in living a fun, happy, successful life. So, it's natural that I want to share that happiness and fun with others. In the book "The Heart of Yoga" by T.K.V. Desikachar, he says, «Yoga is the idea that something changes. This change must bring us to a point where we have never been before. That is to say, that which was impossible becomes possible; that which was unattainable becomes

attainable; that which was invisible can be seen.» To me, you can change the word "yoga" out for "kayaking" in this paragraph and it still rings true. For me, one of the greatest gifts of kayaking is that it takes us out of our heads and allows us to connect with the present moment. What I've come to realize is that a lot of the principles of kayaking are also aspects of spiritual practice like: pay attention, look where you want to go, and learn to face challenges and fears in constructive ways. To me kayaking is part of my spiritual practice. I also feel like it's important to provide opportunities for people to connect with nature and with other people and cultures. When we realize that we are connected to everything around us we have more compassion for people and more respect for the environment. This leads not only to personal transformation, but also to healthier rivers and communities.

**KS: How has your approach evolved since you started teaching with Girls at Play?**

**AL:** I feel like my approach has softened over the years. In the beginning I was very intense and defensive about my work because my perception was that I was being judged from within the industry and had to prove myself in some way. Now I have a lot more confidence in myself and in my work, and I realize that it's not about me being right or other people liking what I do. What's important to me is that I always do my best to create opportunities for women to have fun, learn something (about kayaking, about themselves, about anything...) and feel good about themselves.

**KS: In Mexico, you take the «intermediate» ladies to the famous Alsesec, a river full of falls and drops. Most of them seem very impressed by the river, almost surprised to deal with such a challenge. How do you manage their fears?**

**AL:** I try my best to manage fear and stress on the river with compassion, positive reinforcement, enthusiasm and support. In my opinion, sometimes it's healthy to take a big step up (within reason, using common sense) so that you get a different perspective on your skills and on what is possible. The Alsesec is an opportunity to do that. I work with a great group of female instructors

and we set up extra safety that helps to put the women at ease and allows them to push their limits beyond what they might try with their paddling friends back home. To encourage them, I stay very positive, letting them know that I have confidence in them and that I've got their backs. In addition, I allow the women to be scared and to express their fears. They may even shed some tears and that's ok. Now, there's a big difference for me between enabling the fear and helping women work through it. Although I do allow women to express their fears, I don't let them play the victim and play into drama. It's important that we all understand that what we fear does not always represent the truth of what is happening in that moment.

**KS: Tell us more about your "tough love" approach.**

**AL:** For instance, if I'm standing beside a woman practicing a wet exit, ready to assist her if she needs it, her fear of drowning in that situation is not helping to keep her safe, it's hindering her ability to discover a cool new sport. This is where my "tough love" approach comes in. Some women feel that everyone should be sympathetic to their fears and let them make a big deal out of the situation. I don't agree and I try to be as compassionate as possible in pushing them to take responsibility for their fears and to choose a different approach other than the victimhood. It's not about making them feel bad about their fears or about invalidating their fears, but about helping them to see that they have the power to choose to respond in a different, more productive way.

**KS: Do you think the paddling world really understands your approach?**

**AL:** My goal is not for everyone in the paddling world to understand my approach. If you are drawn to my teaching style, DVDs, trips or retreats then great. If you're not, that's o.k. I'm grateful that the right and perfect people are drawn to my approach.

**KS: In general, do ladies understand what you do better than men?**

**AL:** Obviously more women understand my approach than men because I'm teaching from a female perspective, but there are men out there with whom it resonates too. And there are women out there with whom it doesn't resonate.

**KS: Do you think more men should pay attention to your approach then? Because fear is not an exclusively female thing. Even though it is not expressed, lots of men quit whitewater paddling because they can no longer cope with fear - or they cannot do what they used to, which is very close!**

**AL:** I think it can be tough for men in our society because they are traditionally taught to not show emotion, to be tough and to repress their fears. For some men, admitting that they are fearful can feel very embarrassing, especially if their buddies are buying into the belief that men shouldn't express emotion or fears and should always be pushing harder. This is exactly what made it tough for many women in kayaking for so long. Now that there is more of a balance evolving in the paddling world, I think that it's important to recognize that we all get scared and to learn how to work through it instead of repressing it or acting like it shouldn't bother us. Fear on the river doesn't ever go away if you keep challenging yourself, but everyone can learn strategies for working through it. And, some paddlers choose to not continually push themselves at their edge and they have a great time on the river. Paddling hard whitewater doesn't have to be the idealized ultimate goal in whitewater kayaking. Someone who is challenged in class III can get just as much fun, thrill and challenge as someone who likes to paddle class V. In my opinion, the idea that you're only cool if you paddle hard stuff is what keeps our sport inaccessible to a wider audience. Kayaking is about having fun, being outside and hanging out with awesome people. If you do that on class V, awesome! If you do it on class III, that's awesome too. In other



Anna guiding one of her students in side-surfing on the Octopan River.



Chilling off the river in Mexico.



Circling up to celebrate a great day on the river.





Enjoying the scenery on the Cascades of the Nantahala.



Teaching yoga under the palapa in Mexico.

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words, if you're having a hard time coping with fear then slow down and paddle rivers that you feel really comfortable on for a while. This can be tough because our egos don't want us to feel inferior or wussy. But, ultimately who's living your life? The people who may think you're a wuss for enjoying class III or you? We have to learn how to take care of ourselves or we end up suffering unnecessarily. I think it comes down to respecting other people and not expecting everyone to conform to any one way.

**KS: How do you position yourself in the paddling community?**

**AL:** This has evolved for me over time and it's not something I'd sit around and think and strategize about, until you asked me this question! When I was first competing I was trying to position myself as one of the top female freestyle boaters. When I started working on Girls at Play, and for the first 4 years, I positioned myself as an instructor who provided a safe, friendly and fun atmosphere for women to gain confidence and improve their skills on the water. And I continue to position myself that way with the addition of being an instructor/guide and yoga instructor who combines kayaking with yoga and travel to assist women in discovering, empowering and connecting with their passions, inner strength and confidence.

**KS: "It is ok to cry." This sentence made you famous in the paddling community among men's circles, though more on the mocking side. Does that make you laugh, or piss you off?**

**AL:** If you had asked me this question five to seven years ago I probably would have said that it pisses me off because back then, I took myself and what I believed in too seriously. Today it doesn't bother me one way or the other. Again, people are entitled to their opinions.

**KS: Do you still paddle hard whitewater and how does that fit into your world? If so, do you see yourself doing it for a while? How has your perspective on that aspect of kayaking shifted over the years?**

**AL:** I still enjoy paddling class V like the Green Narrows minus Gorrilla and Sunshine or Overflow Creek, but

I'm no longer interested in pushing myself to paddle really hard stuff. And I really enjoy paddling class IV rivers. There are times when I'm paddling the Green a lot when I feel like I want to run Gorrilla again, but it hasn't happened yet and that's ok. I'm grateful that my attitude has shifted from the goal of trying to prove myself on the river to the goal of relaxing, having fun and spending time with awesome paddlers. I started paddling on big rivers like the New, the Gauley and the Ottawa so I've always felt way more at ease on big water than on creeks. Creeking is challenging for me because I do face my fears every time I'm out there. I think it's healthy and it's a great way for me to actually practice what I teach my students. I have a lot of respect and admiration for the women who race the Green and who paddle really hard stuff. I think they're awesome. Asheville has a great community of paddlers who are really fun to paddle with and that's one of the major motivators for my paddling now. As long as I'm having fun and have awesome people to paddle with I think I'll push myself for a long time to come.

**KS: The specificity of your work seems to bring you some serious media exposure. Is it something you look for? Is it as rewarding as a kayak contest result?**

**AL:** I'm very grateful for the media exposure that my work gets. I actually feel that I could do a better job at seeking out media exposure and I would love to be able to afford a PR person. It is rewarding to get media exposure because it validates that what I'm doing is interesting and helps people. It does feel like an accomplishment to get recognized by the media and it can be just as exciting as winning an event.

**KS: Your third DVD will be released in the spring. Why did you decide to make another whitewater DVD when everyone claims that the whitewater market is shrinking?**

**AL:** It would have been easier and much cheaper for me to not produce a new whitewater DVD, but I am continuously learning and evolving as a paddler, instructor and person so it's important for me to share new information with my clients. Especially when I feel that it can help them with their skills and help them have

more fun on the water. That's why I decided to produce Whitewater Kayaking with Anna Levesque. I feel like my clients and all women paddlers deserve to have the most up-to-date information. Of course, instructional DVDs and books are snapshots in time and after each one I realize that I left something out or could have done something a little different. That's just part of the process. Whitewater may be a small industry, but it's a community of people who feel passionate about the sport. And as long as there are women paddling, I'll continue to invest in the sport.

**KS: What are your plans for the future? The Nantahala Outdoor Center\* was created by Andrew's grandfather, Payson Kennedy. Today, Payson is more into retreats and community-driven projects. Do you see Andrew and yourself taking over some day and bringing your own touch to it?**

**AL:** This is an interesting question. Andrew and I both currently work with the NOC's Paddling School. Andrew is one of the head instructors and I run my women's paddling retreats and Mexico Trips out of the NOC and teach their women's clinics. It's a great relationship and NOC is a great company. We've both been invited to be more involved in the Paddling School, but for now we're both very happy with what we're doing. We'll just have to see what opportunities arise in the future.

**KS: Where do you want to take your business?**

**AL:** Eventually I would like to open a small adventure retreat center in the mountains where people can come to paddle, mountain bike, hike, practice yoga, eat healthy, organic food, rejuvenate, relax and feel good. There are infinite possibilities for the future so we'll see what happens. For now, my new DVD, Whitewater Kayaking with Anna Levesque, is about to be released. Then I'm going to start working on a "Yoga for Kayaking" DVD. I see myself continuing to run more retreats/trips that combine kayaking with yoga because that's what I feel most passionate about right now. I'm currently developing a program of individual coaching that would include private kayak instruction combined with private yoga consultation (designing a yoga routine specific to the student). I think this type of program can really benefit paddlers in improving their skills and taking care of their bodies so they can paddle for the rest of their lives. Of course, I love running my women's Mexico paddling trips so I see myself continuing to do that for as long as I can! And I'm creating some multi-day wilderness yoga/kayak/raft trips for the future too. Developing a non-profit program with the goal of helping young girls build confidence through kayaking is also in the works. I'm on the organizing committee for the 2010 Whitewater Symposium. Oh, and Andrew and I are planning to start a family sometime in the near future too... I think I'll be keeping myself busy for a while!

\* Among North America biggest rafting and kayaking school. Based in North Carolina on the banks of the Nantahala.

